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ABSTRACT

This historical study examines some of the possible reasons that a large portion of Mexican American children do not succeed in the public school system in California, exploring the background of the language issue. Parental factors, socioeconomic status, and self-perceptions are three factors related to failure among Mexican American children in school. One of the most important factors related to the success or failure of the Mexican American child in the public school is the language barrier. This paper explores the background of this language issue and looks at the causes of failure of Mexican-American Children in school. (Contains 14 references.) (Author)

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BARRIERS TO LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN SCHOOL-AGE MEXICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

BY

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May 1994

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Abstract

This historical study examines some of the reasons that a large portion of Mexican American children do not succeed in the public school system in California. Parental factors, socioeconomic status, and self perceptions are three factors related to failure among Mexican American children in school. One of the most important factors related to the success or failure of the Mexican American child in the public school is the language barrier. This paper explores the background of this language issue and looks at the causes of failure of Mexican American children in school.

Introduction

The performance in school of Mexican American students, their low academic achievement, and their high dropout rate are looked on as a social and educational problem in need of solution. In the past, this problem was not widely recognized and there was little interest in correcting it.

Statement of the Problem

Mexican American children are not learning in the same way and with the same degree of success as other children in American schools. Although all children seem to start out at nearly the same levels, many Mexican American children start falling behind by the end of the third grade. Some children come to school with English skills; others do not. Some bring literacy skills in their first language and others bring no prior skills at all. Children with Spanish literacy skills do better than children not literate in their first language. Regardless of where they start, Mexican American children continue to fall further behind in school because they have not mastered the English language. Research now shows that before children can successfully learn a second language they must acquire all the skills necessary in their first language.

Rationale

Mexican American children, when compared to children from other countries, do not acquire second language skills rapidly.

Historically, research has found that Mexican American children do not achieve success in school. Many drop out of high school and some leave even sooner. Health (1985) states that for all children academic success depends more on how they use language than on the specific language they use. Schools need to encourage the academic and vocational efforts of all children, regardless of their language backgrounds. Schools can do this by providing the best possible range of written and oral language uses.

Cummins (1979) offers a theoretical framework which plays a central role in the interaction among sociocultural, linguistic, and school factors and which explains the academic and cognitive development of bilingual education. This education can only be achieved on the basis of adequately developed first language skills.

Cummins developed the Contextual Interaction Theory which is now regarded as theoretical rationale for bilingual education in California schools. The name refers to the necessary interaction of the context of the student with the context of the school. The Contextual Interaction Theory has five principles:

> Principle One: The Linguistic Threshold
>
> For bilingual students, the degree to which proficiency in both their first language and their second language is developed is positively associated with academic achievement.
>
> Principle Two: The Dimensions of Language Proficiency

Language proficiency is the ability to use language for both academic purposes and basic communication tasks.

Principle Three: Common Underlying Proficiency

For language minority students, the development of the primary language skills necessary to complete academic tasks forms the basis for similar proficiency in English.

Principle Four: Second Language Acquisition

Acquisition of basic communicative competency in a second language is a function of comprehensible second language input and a supportive affective environment.

Principle Five: Student Status

The perceived status of students affects the interactions between teachers and students and among students themselves. Student outcomes are affected.

According to Toukomaa and Skutnabb-Kangas in Cummins, a high level of competence must be attained in the mother tongue as a prerequisite to the best possible attainment of the threshold level of second language competence. If a child is in a foreign-language learning environment without the support of his mother tongue the development of his ability in his first language will slow down or even stop. The child will not have basis for learning the second language well enough to attain the threshold level in it.

It is important to distinguish among minorities who do well in school and ones who do not, and then to find the reasons for this

discrepancy. Minority status alone does not account for school failure or success. This study examines the factors which determine success or failure of Mexican American children in our schools.

Historical Perspective

In the first three decades of this century, as the Mexican American population in the United States began its rapid growth, the dominant white or Anglo society was not concerned about the schooling of Mexican Americans. According to Carter (1970), teachers and administrators shared society's view of the Mexican American as an outsider and as someone not expected to participate fully in American life. Racial prejudice was more prevalent at this time. Literature on children of Mexican descent emphasized their inadequacies. Low IQ test scores typical of Mexican children were considered evidence of innate intellectual inferiority. This presumed inferiority was used at this time as justification for the segregation of Mexican American children in our public schools. Mexicans were thought to be capable only of manual labor; American farmers thought that education was not necessary for the farm work many Mexican students would later perform.

Carter states that very little was done in these early years to address the problem of Mexican American children. They rarely attended school past the primary grades. During the Depression many rural Mexican Americans migrated to cities; finally creating more awareness of the problems. Educational literature at this time

described the Mexican Americans as disease-ridden, violence and crime oriented, innately inferior, yet simple and artistic.

Educators in the 1930's and throughout the 1940's began to consider the school as an agency for the acculturation of the Mexican American child. These educators recommended appropriate methods to achieve Americanization, hoping that this would change Mexican children from half-hearted Americans into law-abiding and useful American citizens. In the 1930's Mexican American schools emphasized vocational and manual arts training, English skills, health and cleanliness, and American core values such as thrift and punctuality. School segregation was recommended and commonly practiced. After the 1940's educators' views began to change as IQ came to be seen more as a reflection of social environment than as a hereditary condition. Studies at this time still presented Mexican American children as mentally inferior.

Carter goes on to describe changes brought about by World War II. As Mexican Americans moved to urban centers, they became aware of their rights and privileges as American citizens and began to demand change. They wanted an end to segregated schools and other practices of discrimination. Even though segregation was illegal, many states allowed it to continue. It took court orders to end segregation; even then de facto segregation continued. Today, schools are still racially and ethnically unequal, because housing patterns

continue to influence the sites for new schools and the areas in which children must live to attend them.

Self Perceptions Among Voluntary and Involuntary Immigrants

Ogbu (1974) states that minority groups have incorporated into their societies either voluntarily or involuntarily. Those who have incorporated voluntarily are immigrants. Immigrant minorities have usually moved to their present society for a better life. They believed that moving would lead to more economic well-being, greater political freedom, and better opportunities overall. Their expectations continue to influence the way they perceive and respond to treatment by members of the dominant group and by the institutions controlled by the dominant group.

> There are two forms of historical forces which shape the different cultural models of minority groups who are relatively successful or unsuccessful in school. One is the initial terms of incorporation of these minorities into the society in which they now exist; the other is the pattern of adaptive responses that the minorities have made to subsequent discriminatory treatment by members of the dominant group.(Ogbu 1991, p. 8)

Involuntary minorities, or nonimmigrant minorities, are people who came here through slavery, conquest, or colonization. They normally resent the loss of their former freedom, and they perceive the

social, political, and economic barriers against them as part of an undeserved oppression.

Discern and Prejudice

According to Ogbu, immigrant and involuntary minorities both experience discrimination and prejudice at the hands of the dominant group, but when confronted with these problems, the two groups tend to interpret them differently. The immigrants seem to interpret the economic, political, and social barriers, more or less as temporary problems which can be overcome with time, hard work, and education.

The immigrants also have a positive frame of reference which allows them to develop an optimistic view of future possibilities. They are able to compare their present situations with former lives in their home countries. This comparison enables them to believe that their new society presents more and better opportunities for themselves and their children. They also see their marginal jobs as better than jobs they would have in their homeland. Immigrants bring with them a sense of their identity, which they had before emigration. They seem to keep this social identity at least through the first generation, even though they are learning the language and culture of their new country.

Barriers

Involuntary minorities interpret the economic, social, and political barriers differently. They do not have a homeland with which to compare their present situation, so they compare their status with

that of the members of the dominant group. They usually conclude that they are worse off than they ought to be, simply because they belong to a subordinate minority group. Involuntary minorities have a negative frame of reference with respect to status mobility. Unlike immigrants, they do not see their situation as temporary. They interpret the discrimination against them as permanent and institutionalized. Because involuntary minorities do not believe that society's rules for self-advancement work for them, they usually try to change the rules.

The collective struggle strategy is used effectively by involuntary minorities to change those rules for advancement which seem to work against them. These groups develop an oppositional identity because they perceive and experience their treatment by members of the dominant group as collective and permanent. They also know that they cannot escape their birth determined membership in a subordinate group by returning to a homeland. They do not see their social identity as merely different; rather, they see it as oppositional to the social identity of their oppressors, and the dominant group members. The oppositional identity combines with the oppositional cultural frame of reference to make it more difficult for involuntary minorities to cross cultural boundaries and engage in cross-cultural learning. The cultural frame of reference of the dominant group is threatening to the identity and security, as well as the solidarity of involuntary minorities.

Finally, involuntary minorities distrust members of the dominant group and the social institutions controlled by them. Their history has

shown them that they cannot trust members or institutions of the dominant group. Also, involuntary minorities do not trust the schools to provide good education for their children. Unlike the immigrants, involuntary minorities find no justification for the prejudice or discrimination that they experience in school and society. They see prejudice and discrimination against them as institutionalized and enduring. According to Matute-Bianchi (1986) what is important to all minorities is their perceptions of themselves and the value that they put on their education.

Parental Factors

Simoniello (1981) studied eight professional Mexican American women and found one reoccurring theme. All eight women felt that they received encouragement from both parents to achieve, just as intensely as the males in their household were encouraged. Their parents had high expectations for the education of their children. For these women, parental expectations of their school work were consistently high. They were expected not just to do as well, as their classmates; they were expected to do better. All women noted they were expected to get married and raise a family after high school. Although education was considered very important, higher education was not stressed. High school was thought good enough. Receiving a high school diploma typically signals the end of formal education.

One of these women studied by Simoniello said that there are two kinds of success. The first kind of success is personal; it is

personal to the degree to which you can live with it and still have security and strength. The other kind of success is tied to status; it comes through promotional mobility.

Simoniello recognized, that regardless of economic status, parents influence the development of their daughters as dependent or independent people. The reassurance of parental love encouraged these women to succeed beyond their parents' expectations.

According to Lopez (1993), children whose parents maintain frequent communication with the school tend to be higher achieving whether they are Anglo or Mexican American . Lopez also found that Mexican American parents of junior high school students attended parent-teacher conferences significantly more often when their children were succeeding in school than when they were failing.

Academic Success

Sociocultural variables predispose Mexican American students towards academic failure, according to Alva (1991). Factors include the low educational and occupational attainment of parents, family income and composition, ethnic minority status, and the amount of learning materials in the home. Little is known about the factors that encourage academic success of Mexican Americans. An academically invulnerable student can be described as one who sustains high levels of achievement, motivation, and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions which place them at risk of doing poorly and ultimately dropping out of school.

Alva states that there a number of personal characteristics that are evident among academically successful students. Academically successful students show positive self-evaluation of their academic status at school and a sense of control over their success and failure. They also appear to have a supportive network of family, friends, and teachers on whom they rely for counsel and advice in stressful or difficult situations. Mexican American students also state that their parents in particular are an important source of support and encouragement.

Before children can be successful in school, they must first know the language. All human beings have the ability to acquire a second language if they receive comprehensible input in a low-anxiety situation. Terrell (1992) states that language skills should be considered by stages. These stages are:

I. Survival communication skills.

II. Extended communication, beginning literacy.

III. Language for academic purposes.

Stage one consists of the beginning of Cummins' Basic Communication Skills; BICS, and Stage III corresponds to his Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency; CALP. Stage II is the transition between Stage I and Stage III. Students needs to reach Stage III before they are able to succeed fully in school. It will take the average child anywhere from four to nine years to reach Stage III, and some children will not be in school long enough to ever reach this stage.

Educational Attainment

Gandara (1980) states that Hispanics have a poor record of educational attainment. Statistics show that about 21 percent of Hispanic high school graduates go on to college, but between 40 and 50 percent of Hispanics drop out of school before graduation. Of the ones who attend college, about two-thirds attend two-year institutions where attrition rates are very high. Of the total number of Hispanics attending college, about half drop out before completing their degrees. The result is that about two percent of all bachelor's degrees go to Hispanics, and only seven percent of that small number of degrees are earned in the biological and physical sciences. Hispanic recipients of doctoral degrees make up only a little more than one percent of the recipients.

According to Gandara, there are certain well-established background characteristics that can predict school performance. Family income, parents' educational level, race, and ethnicity are powerful predictors. Low income, a low level of education on the part of the parents, and membership in a racial or ethnic minority group all contribute to low achievement in school.

Gandara makes the point that the college-educated Hispanics she interviewed were bicultural. They came from homes that were, for the most part, Spanish speaking, and homes in which cultural ties to Mexico were still strong. They had a keen sense of pride and felt good about who they were. They were able to adapt to the dominant culture

and felt that the ability to feel comfortable in both cultures became an important asset in promoting themselves and their careers.

Education is perhaps the single most important issue for Hispanics. According to DiMartino (1988), Hispanics are the most undereducated major United States population group; they experience a cycle of under education that begins in the earliest grades. Early school failure has been shown to be the greatest predictor of the likelihood that a child will drop out of school later. Both English proficient and limited-English proficient Hispanic children are at the highest risk of failure, but limited-English proficient children are at the highest risk of early school failure.

In 1986, 11.9% of Hispanics over 25 years of age had completed less than five years of schooling, compared with only 1.8% of the total non-Hispanic population. National studies show that up to 56% of Hispanic adults can be considered functionally illiterate. As of 1987, only 50.9% of Hispanics 25 years of age and over had completed four years of high school or more, compared to 63.4% of African Americans and 77.0% of whites. The median number of school years completed by Hispanics as of 1987 was 12.0 compared to 12.4 for African Americans and 12.7 for whites. The dropout rate for Hispanics remains the highest of any major United States sub population, estimated at 40-50%; it is over 70% in some large urban areas. Early school failure has been shown to be the greatest predictor of a child later dropping out of school.

Hispanic leaders surveyed in 1983 saw education as the single most important problem facing Hispanics today. Employment placed second; of course, it is directly related to education. Orfield (1986) states that Hispanics place a very high value on education and are deeply concerned about the poor performance of many Hispanic students in school. Many Hispanic parents support the schools and see them as a way of maintaining their language and culture for their children.

Cummins (1988) urges Hispanic parents to become advocates for their children's education in a more active way than they have been in the past. He suggests that parents make the educational system work for their children, not against them. Parents need to take an aggressive approach for better education in their children's schools

Dunn in Cummins concludes that the role of the school in children's academic development is acknowledged, but it is dismissed on the grounds that teachers are not miracle workers. Dunn goes on to say that Hispanic students and their parents have also failed the schools and society, because they have not been dedicated or motivated enough to make the system work for them.

According to Vargas (1988), education tops the list of concerns of the Hispanic community. A larger proportion of Hispanics than either whites or African Americans are either in school, should be in school, are about to enter school, or have children of school age. Information from the United States Census Bureau for March 1987

showed that the Hispanic population had increased by 30% since 1980, a growth rate about five times that of the rest of the United States population. In March 1987, Hispanics made up 7.9% of the total United States population, compared to 6.8% in 1982. The high school dropout rate for Hispanics is still at 50% or more. With the increasing numbers of Hispanics coming into the United States, this means more and more undereducated people looking for jobs.

Discussion

I started this thesis with the intention of finding answers to my questions. I was looking for solutions to the many problems which the Mexican American student faces in the schools today.

As a substitute teacher in Sonoma County this year, I have been able to observe many children in several different schools. After observing all the different cultures, I noticed that the Mexican American children did not do as well in school as children from other cultures. The Mexican American children I observed in my student teaching the year before were still struggling with the English language, but the Cambodian children were speaking the language and starting to do their school work in the all English speaking classroom. I wanted to know why this was happening and what I could to change the situation.

The results of my study were discouraging. There has been a minimal amount of research done on the subject of success and failure of Mexican Americans. The research suggests change, but little has been done to make the changes.

I see school as place to socialize children. The schools are failing to do this with all minorities, not just Mexican Americans. Socialization involves bringing the child into a membership in society by teaching him certain behaviors, knowledge, and values.

I think all schools attempt to teach the dominant culture to all children, but I feel the academic success of a Mexican American child will depend more on the degree to which his home has been oriented to

the Anglo middle-class culture. The parents of Mexican American children need to be educated along with their children. They need to know that their children need to keep their first culture and first language, and to build upon the new language and culture. Parents and children alike need to know that they can cross cultural boundaries without first denying their identity as Mexicans. As teachers, we need to be aware of this also.

It is now known that to succeed in school today a child must know and understand the dominant culture's language. A child needs to understand what is being said, in order to become educated. Regardless of the child's first language, we as teachers and administrators need to become more aware of problems facing the non-English speaking student.

The lack of full English proficiency and literacy among all language minorities in the United States presents a serious problem to our nation. Illiteracy not only limits opportunities for Hispanics, but also places a strain on our economy. In a country as advanced as ours, every person, regardless of their first language should be able to read and write.

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